Islam and the sanctity of Jerusalem

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Abstract

The attitude of Islam towards Jerusalem has changed over the centuries. It seems probable that for some time during the life of the Prophet Muhammad, Jerusalem was the direction of prayer for the early community. In the late 600s, the Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik even made an attempt at redirecting the pilgrimage to this city, instead of Mecca. Later, however, Jerusalem did not enjoy a special place among other cities and the Crusades did not initiate any major counter movements to reconquer it from the Christians: for the Crusaders, the conquest of Jerusalem was more important than it was for Muslims. In modern times, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is not based on any special religious position of Jerusalem for Muslims.

"Glory be to Him, who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque to the Further Mosque the precincts of which We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing." (Q. 17: 1)[2]

According to the standard interpretation, this verse tells about the nocturnal journey of the Prophet Muhammad at the end of the 610s from Mecca to Jerusalem and his subsequent ascent to Heaven, where he met with several earlier prophets. These acknowledged him as their equal and as the final prophet sent to humankind. After this experience, Muhammad returned to Mecca that very night.[3] Surah Q 17 is usually considered Meccan, i.e., it was revealed before the *Hijra* to Medina (622).[4]

However, read without the help of the later interpretative tradition,[5] the verse is obscure and gives us few unambiguous pieces of information. It only tells us that someone, presumably God (capitalizations are Arberry's), "carried (...) by night" (*asrā bi-*) some "servant of His" from a

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[2] Translations of Q 17: 1 and Q 2: 142–145, 149, are taken from A. J. Arberry, The Koran interpreted (2 vols.; London: Penguin).

[3] Cf. Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya* (5 vols.; eds. J. Thābit, M. Maḥmūd and S. Ibrāhīm; Cairo: Dār al-ḥadīth, 1996) II: 5–17 = A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sīrat rasūl Allāh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1955) 181–7. Ibn Hishām died in 833 and the major part of his text derives from Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767). Taking the text of any of these authors to represent a much earlier stance is unwarranted.

[4] For the periodization of the Surahs, see T.Nöldeke and F. Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns* (3 vols.; 1909–1938, repr. Hildesheim–Zürich–New York: Georg Olms 2005).

[5] Except for the Qur'ān, Islamic literary sources have received their final form at the earliest towards the end of the 8th century and they describe the birth of Islam, as it was then conceived, through the lenses of highly-developed Islam, giving a standardized view as to how things went at first. For the reliability, or the lack of it, of Islamic sources for early Islam, cf., e.g., F.M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins. The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 14, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) and J. Hämeen-Anttila, "Christianity and Christians in the Qur'ān". *Christian–Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* (d. D. Thomas vol. I (600–900). Leiden–New York: Brill, 2009) 21–30.

temple, or place of prayer, *masjid,*[6] into another temple, or place of prayer. As such, the verse tells us practically nothing that we could pinpoint to any geographical or historical context.

In its problematic nature, the verse is a good starting point for discussing the attitudes of Islam towards Jerusalem and its sanctity and, especially, the historical development of these attitudes.[7]

The primary sacred city of Islam is Mecca. It is natural to take the term *al-masjid al-ḥarām* "the Holy Mosque", used in Q 17: 1, to refer to the temple of the Kaʿba in Mecca.[8] The whole surrounding area was, and is, considered *ḥaram* "holy", to the extent that non-Muslims are not allowed into this area, and their presence on the Arabian Peninsula, especially in the Ḥijāz, has for a long time been restricted.[9]

In Islam, Mecca is undoubtedly the most sacred town. Medina, the hometown of Muḥammad from 622 to 632 and the town in which he is buried, comes far behind in sanctity.[10] Theoretically, Islamic theology does not claim that the Omnipresent God were particularly strongly present in Mecca, but in practice the idea is there and has always been. Two examples should suffice: when coming to the sacred area, marked by signposts, the pilgrim is expected to shout *labbayka Rabbī labbayka* "Here I am, Lord, here I am". The pilgrim has come to visit the House of his God.[11] Secondly, the earliest parts of the Qur'ān call God by terms such as *Rabb hādhā l-bayt* "the Lord of this temple" (Q 106: 3), which localize God to the temple he inhabits.[12]

Islamic sources also know the concept of the Holy Land, taken from Jewish, or more probably, Christian sources. As a concept covering a larger area, it is rarely used, but the city of Jerusalem, in Arabic *al-Quds* "the Holy" tai *(Bayt) al-Maqdis* "the Holy Site",[13] is important to Muslims, too, being, among other things, the site of the Mosque of the Rock. Jerusalem is, undoubtedly, an

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[6] The Arabic word *masjid* "mosque" comes from the root SJD, itself probably an Aramaic loanword, see A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān. With a Foreward by Gerhard Böwering and Jane Dammen McAuliffe* (Texts and Studies on the Qur'ān 3. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2007 [1938]) 162–3, and originally means any place where one prays (literally "bows down").

[7] See, in general, also R. Tottoli, "La santità di Gerusalemme nell'Islam," *Henoch* 18, 3 (1996) 327–55 and A. Neuwirth, "The significance of Jerusalem in Islam", in *Militia Sancti Sepulcri. Idea e istituzioni* (ed. K. Elm and C. D. Fonseca; Città del Vaticano, 1998) 141–59, for two analyses of the significance of Jerusalem in Islam.

[8] Over the last decades, there have been many attempts to relocate the birth of Islam to areas other than the traditional area of the Ḥijāz, but these are highly controversial. For a discussion of several of these revisionist theories, see Hämeen-Anttila, "Christianity".

[9] The term *ḥaram* primarily means "protected; taboo" but it may also be translated as "sacred; holy".

[10] For Shiites, though, Kerbela and the other scenes of Shiite martyrdom vie at least with Medina, if not even with Mecca, in sanctity and religious importance.

[11] Cf., e.g., F. A. Klein, *The Religion of Islam* (London–New York: Curzon Press–Humanities Press, 1979 [1906]), 166. On Mecca in general, see F. E. Peters, *Mecca. A Literary History of the Muslim Holy Land* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[12] Obviously, later theological literature would by no means agree in saying that this implies that God *lives* in, or is localized to, the temple, but such expressions were already used in the oldest layer of the Qur'ān where theological finesse should not be expected. Note also that the name Allāh is rarely used in the First Meccan Period.

[13] From the Arabic root QDS "to be holy". *Bayt al-Maqdis* has been borrowed from Hebrew *Bēt ham-Miqdāsh*, cf., e.g., H. Busse, "Jerusalem," (in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. J. D. McAuliffe, 7 vols.; Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2000-10) 3: 2–7.

important Islamic city, but it is less clear, how and when the idea of Jerusalem's special sanctity has developed and how it has influenced Muslim thought over the centuries.

Since earliest times, Q 17: 1 has often, but not exclusively, been interpreted as referring to Jerusalem, and the expression *al-masjid al-aqṣā* "the furthest temple/praying place", used in it, has later given its name to the al-Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem. This is where Muḥammad is commonly believed to have arrived during the nocturnal journey and it is from there that he ascended to Heaven (*miʿrāj*).

It should, however, be emphasized that all this is later interpretation. It is possible that Q 17: 1 originally referred to Jerusalem, but there is, on the other hand, no hard evidence to support this. The verse is not integrated into the subsequent verses of the Surah and, being wholly without context, it is not understandable without the interpretative tradition, which is at least decades later than the Surah itself and was mainly consolidated at a time when Islam had developed from its original form closer to the Classical Islam we know. In does not represent the thought of early 7th-century Muslims. It is equally possible that the identification of the "Further Mosque" with Jerusalem dates back to ʿAbd al-Malik's intended reform at the end of the 7th century (see below). Jerusalem is not mentioned by name in the Qur'ān,[14] which makes all interpretations involving this holy town of the Jews and the Christians difficult and complicated.

Also the Medinan verses Q 2: 142–145, 149, are usually taken to refer to Jerusalem:

"The fools among the people will say, 'what has turned them from the direction they were facing in their prayers aforetime?' Say: 'To God belong the East and the West; He guides whomsoever He will to a straight path.' (...) We did not appoint the direction thou wast facing, except that We might know who followed the Messenger from him who turned on his heels. (...) We have seen thee turning thy face about in the heaven; now We will surely turn thee to a direction that shall satisfy thee. Turn thy face towards the Holy Mosque; and wherever you are, turn your faces towards it. (...) Yet if thou shouldst bring to those that have been given the Book every sign, they will not follow thy direction; thou art not a follower of their direction, neither are they followers of one another's direction. (...) From whatsoever place thou issuest, turn thy face towards the Holy Mosque; it is the truth from thy Lord. God is not heedless of the things you do."

Typically to the Qur'ānic style, this passage, too, leaves much open and does not explain what it is referring to. Commonly, it is understood to refer to the change in the direction of prayer, *qibla*, from Jerusalem to Mecca and its "Holy Mosque", the Kaʿba. As the *qibla* is intimately linked to, and in a sense defined by, the sacred geography of Islam, these verses are crucial to the understanding of the relation of the Muslims to Jerusalem as a sacred city in the early years of their religion.

To understand the situation, one has to take a glance at the birth of Islam and the first years of the Prophet Muḥammad's career. Muḥammad's life and especially his early years are still largely unknown and it would be premature to claim finality for any theories as to how his career as a prophet started. My own hypothesis is that he started within the sphere of the earlier *kāhin*[15] tradition and the earliest parts of the Qur'ān, in my opinion, bear strong signs of coming from a

[14] It should be emphasized that the Qur'ān, in general, only very sparingly mentions place names.

[15] A *kāhin* is usually taken to have been a kind of soothsayer, but there seems to be reason enough to consider the possibility that the *kāhins* may have represented an old prophet tradition as well, see J. Hämeen-Anttila, "Arabian prophecy," (in *Prophecy in its Ancient Near Eastern Context. Mesopotamian, Biblical, and Arabian Perspectives*, ed. M. Nissinen, SBL Symposium Series. Atlanta: SBL, 2000) 115–46.

period when Muḥammad knew little about Judaism or Christianity and the traditions of these two religions, including the role of Jerusalem in them.[16]

There are widely different interpretations of the beginning of Muḥammad's career,[17] but what seems more or less ascertained[18] is that relatively early Muḥammad became acquainted with the Near Eastern monotheistic tradition and was impressed by it. However, the early history of Islam was codified much later, up to two centuries after the events themselves, and hence our sources present the genesis of Islam as it was believed to have taken place some centuries later. The Qur'ān, however, is usually considered a rather reliable though unfortunately vague source for the events in the early seventh century.

One part of this reinterpretation of the early history concerns the temple of the Kaʿba, which in Classical Islam was (re)defined as a major sanctuary both for pre-Islamic pagans and the earliest Muslims, having thus been a religious centre of orientation for the Muslims from the very beginning. It seems obvious that the central role of the Kaʿba in pre-Islamic times has been exaggerated, but the temple may well have been of some importance to the earliest Muslims, even though it was a pagan temple and its reinterpretation as a monotheistic temple established by Abraham probably only took place during Muḥammad's career.[19] Q 2: 142–4, strongly implies that there was a change in the *qibla*, or prayer direction, of the Muslims in the Medinan period and this change may well be a sign of a more extensive change in the religious orientation of the early Muslims.

The full significance of this does not always seem to have been noticed. If Q 2: 142–144 is used as a proof of a change in the *qibla* and the end result is common knowledge – Muslims throughout the world pray towards the Kaʿba – then the earlier direction must, by necessity, have been somewhere else (if we do not posit an even later second change, which would be improbable). There are only

[16] In Hämeen-Anttila, "Arabian Prophecy," I endeavoured to show how strong the *kāhin*/prophet tradition was and in J. Hämeen-Anttila, "The Prophet Muhammad and the Arabian Prophecy" (*Studies in Rewritten Bible* 6, 2016) 255–73. I concentrate on the beginning of Muḥammad's career on an admittedly hypothetical basis. On the other hand, Jerusalem, as a major Near Eastern city, must have been at least vaguely known also on the Arabian Peninsula.

[17] E.g., A. Neuwirth, "Qur'anic readings of the Psalms" (in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx., Leiden–Boston: Brill 2010) 733–8 and more generally *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang*, Sinzheim: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010) depict the earliest phases of Muḥammad's career very differently, claiming to find vestiges of Biblical texts in the early parts of the Qur'ān. The evidence she produces is highly interesting but cannot be considered conclusive.

[18] If, namely, we exclude from discussion some radical revisionist theories, which locate the birth of Islam, both geographically and temporarily, to some context other than the traditional Mecca/Medina area and sometimes deny the very historicity of Muḥammad, at least as depicted in Islamic sources. Cf., e.g., Hämeen-Anttila, "Christianity".

[19] It should go without saying that the monotheistic paraphernalia, including icons and the horns of the ram slaughtered by Abraham mentioned in various sources (cf. S. H. Griffith, "Christians and Christianity," (in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. J. D. McAuliffe. I. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2001) 1, 307–16, here 309), are legendary. It should also be noted that if my theory of Muḥammad having started his career as a *kāhin* is right, then the early Qur'ānic references to *Rabb hādhā l-bayt* etc. are unproblematic, but if Muḥammad already started within a monotheistic context, then it remains to be explained how, despite this, he oriented himself towards a polytheistic pagan temple, if we do not contextualize Mecca as a Christian city and the Kaʿba as an already monotheistic cult place, which seems improbable.

two probable options. A very common prayer direction in the Near East was towards the East, the rising Sun, which is still used by Oriental Christians. The other option is, of course, Jerusalem.[20]

Both options are possible, but Jerusalem would sound more probable, especially as we know that during the Second Meccan period monotheism and Biblical stories came overwhelmingly into the Qur'ānic text: the spiritual capital of the monotheistic world may easily be conceived as having gained in importance for the early Muslims who at the time were far from seeing themselves as members of a new religion, but considered themselves to be reformists of the one monotheistic religion, as fully evidenced by the Qur'ānic text.

This is also supported by the Islamic tradition – which, it should be kept in mind also in this case, is much later than the events it describes. This tradition nowhere says that the early Muslims would have turned towards the rising Sun when praying, and there is no evidence to support such an idea.

Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 2, 157–8 (= Guillaume, *Life*, 258–9), relates that the change took place 17 months after the *hijra* of the Prophet, i.e., in 623, and thereby the *qibla* changed from Jerusalem (back, Ibn Hishām implies) to the Kaʿba. The idea, however, of a universal direction of prayer towards a temple perhaps better suits a more developed monotheistic tradition (one God, one *qibla*) than pre-Islamic paganism, where several gods were worshipped in a variety of temples and cult places throughout the Arabian Peninsula and hence Jerusalem may well have been the original *qibla* of the Muslims. According to most sources, Muḥammad would originally have prayed towards the Kaʿba, but this may well be a later reinterpretation based on the position of the Kaʿba in Classical Islam.

The change and its background have been narrated in Ibn Hishām's *Sīra* with surprisingly few details, as if the reminiscence would have been an awkward one that was not cherished but that could not be got rid of, either.[21] Such it may well have been. Many later sources emphasize that in Mecca the Kaʿba had been Muḥammad's *qibla* during the Jerusalem period, too, because he used to pray, as it were, behind the Kaʿba, so that while facing Jerusalem he was simultaneously facing the Kaʿba, too. Thus, the coincidence with its double *qibla* safeguards Muḥammad and the early Muslims from the inevitable conclusion that for a lengthy period the prominent early Muslims had made invalid, or at least irregular, prayers.[22] Another partial solution was to claim that there had been another, earlier change: from the original *qibla* of the Kaʿba, the direction was temporarily changed to Jerusalem, and then back to the Kaʿba. There is, however, little evidence for such a series of changes and it is somewhat improbable in itself.

A change of the *qibla* from Jerusalem to the Kaʿba would fit well the religious development of Muḥammad as shown by the Qur'ān. Whether Muḥammad started his career as a *kāhin* or not, he was early acquainted with monotheism and from the Second Meccan period onwards the Qur'ān

[20] Jerusalem as the direction of prayers is already mentioned in the Old Testament in connection with the temple of Solomon, cf., e.g., 2Chronicles 6 and 1Kings 8.

[21] Likewise, Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 2, 117–118 = Guillaume. *Life*, 235–236, mentions only in passing how early Muslims used the horn to call for prayers, in the Jewish fashion, and that the prayer call of the *mu'adhdhin* (muezzin) was a later innovation.

[22] Technically, the theory of abrogation (*naskh*, see J. Burton, "abrogation" (in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, 7 vols., ed. J. D. McAuliffe, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2000–10) 1, 11–9, could, though, be used to save the situation: God may have given a temporary order that was destined to be changed later on. Still, a reminiscence of an original "wrongly" performed prayer ritual for a longer period might have been awkward.

suddenly becomes full of monotheistic themes and Biblical stories.[23] In addition, Jews and Christians are mentioned in very positive terms, and Islam is clearly seen as a mere reformation of the earlier monotheistic tradition. The idea of Muḥammad as the latest link in the chain of prophets beginning with Adam also seems to derive from the same period.

Choosing Jerusalem as the *qibla* would, thus, fit extremely well with the "Biblicalization" of the message Muḥammad was preaching at the time. Praying towards Jerusalem gives a physical expression to this spiritual orientation.

After the *hijra*, though, the Prophet Muḥammad seems to have been disappointed in finding that the Medinan Jews did not welcome him as the most recent Prophet of the same, monotheistic tradition as theirs. Historical sources, unreliable though they always are, tell about conflicts between Muslims and the Medinan Jews, and the Qur'ānic text, our primary evidence, shows that there was a gradual deterioration of attitudes towards earlier monotheists, both Jews and Christians. In such a situation, it would seem natural to redirect the prayers towards the Arab sanctuary of the Kaʿba, despite its pagan background, instead of the Jewish/Christian sanctuary in Jerusalem. To legitimate this, the Kaʿba was given a fictitious monotheistic background by claiming that it had been built by Abraham (see Q 2: 124–136, just a few verses before the crucial passage Q 2: 142–145, 149). At the same time, we can see from historical sources, again partly supported by the Qur'ān, that the conquest of Mecca, perhaps gradually, became a central aim of the community.[24] Islam was being defined as an Arab religion and it found a geographical expression for this by orienting itself towards Mecca and the Kaʿba.

Thus, it would seem that Jerusalem was, indeed, sacred for the early Muslims for a while, after the initial *kāhin*, or at least non-Biblical, period of Muḥammad's career (roughly = the First Meccan period) and until the conflict with Medinan Jews, and the traditional date, 17 months after the Hijra, for the new *qibla* would seem quite feasible. But whatever the exact date, Jerusalem was finally subordinated to Mecca and the Kaʿba in the Medinan period, whether in 623 or later, and the new point of religious orientation became the Kaʿba and so it has remained thereafter.

Although the change of the *qibla* placed the Kaʿba at the centre of religious orientation, Jerusalem remained an important place in Islam, too. Even though the relationship with Jews deteriorated, Muḥammad did not turn away from the Biblical tradition, which remained a central part of Islam even later. Instead, Muḥammad interpreted that the Jews (and later the Christians) had turned away from the true and genuine monotheistic tradition: as the Jews had refused to believe in Jesus, a true prophet according to Islam, they now refused to believe in Muḥammad, too, though he, just like Jesus before him, represented this true tradition in a purified form after the earlier form(s) had become corrupt.[25]

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[23] The earliest parts of the Qur'ān are, in my opinion, more monolatric than monotheist. For a discussion of this, see Hämeen-Anttila, "Prophet".

[24] The existence of the temple of Kaʿba can be proven for the pre-Islamic period, but it should be emphasized that its position as the only, or even the most important, temple and target for pilgrimage on the Peninsula rests on a very weak basis. In her *Meccan Trade and Rise of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1987), Patricia Crone has convincingly shown that the unique position of Mecca and the Kaʿba in the pre-Islamic period is a late legend, born after Mecca had reached this position in the Islamic times.

[25] On this corruption, *taḥrīf*, see S. Lowin, "Revision and alteration" (iin *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, 7 vols., ed. J. D. McAuliffe, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2000–10) 4, 448–51.

The Kaʿba had become the centre of religious experience, and the centre of the universe for many later Muslims, and Muḥammad the true prophet, but Jesus and the Biblical tradition remained part and parcel of Islam. The early Muslims conceived themselves to be upholders of this true tradition. Even though they no longer turned towards Jerusalem for their prayers, Jerusalem retained an important place in their religious imagination. Muslims had religious ties with the town that had been the scene of the preaching of Jesus and many other prophets – as the real geography of Israel was obscure for the early Muslims on the Arabian Peninsula, Jerusalem became the sole centralized symbol of true Judaism and Christianity. The Qur'ān mentions few place names, so that the stories of the prophets had few concrete places to be attached to, and the most important of these sacred places, Jerusalem, was, in a sense, more central to Muslims than to Jews and Christians, who had a more variegated sacred Palestinian geography at their disposal than the Muslims.

After the death of Muḥammad (632), the Islamic Empire grew rapidly. The Arabs conquered a major part of the area that had been governed by Persia and Byzantium. Military expeditions were sent to all areas which interested the Arabs – the sub-Saharan Africa never interested them and their troops made no serious attempts to conquer it, and they were also relatively uninterested in Europe, Spain excluded. Soon the Empire extended from Southern France to the Indus.[26] Jerusalem was conquered less than half a dozen years after the death of Muḥammad.

Many Christian and Jewish sources, including contemporary ones, either imply or say directly that Jerusalem was the main aim of the conquests[27] and the other areas were, as it were, a side effect of this main conquest. Although such an interpretation is interesting, it is perhaps not quite tenable, as Arab armies went in several directions and there is no tangible evidence that Jerusalem would have had a central position in their plans, even if there were such plans in the first place.

It is probable that these texts tell more of their authors' religious orientation than of the conquerors'. For Christians, Jerusalem held a very special place and it was natural for them to believe that it was also central for the Muslims. The loss of Jerusalem was a major blow to the geographical-religious identity of Christians and its loss was, thus, given special importance, which was also projected on the Muslims: what was of importance for Christian authors, was thought to have been equally important for the conquerors. – This importance, though, should not be exaggerated on the Christian side, either. Christians did well after the conquest, with Rome and Constantinople still in their hands: the gravitation point of Christianity had already moved to other areas, and Jerusalem had acquired more of a symbolic than a practical value.

Jerusalem was, though, still an important city for the Muslims, too, being one of the great Near Eastern towns, with added religious significance. Traditional Muslim historiography claims, perhaps rightly, that the Caliph ʿUmar himself came to witness its conquest in 637 (or 638), and there are several stories about the event.[28] The presence of the Caliph would have been exceptional and a clear sign of how high Jerusalem ranked in the conqueror's mind.

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[26] On the conquests in general, see, e.g., K. Y. Blankinship, *End of the Jihād State. The Reign of Hishām ibn Abd al-Malik and the Collapse of the Umayyads* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

[27] See R. G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997) and P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism. Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) (indices of both, s.v. Jerusalem).

[28] See, e.g., F. Buhl, "al-Kuds" (in*: E.J. Brill's First Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 12 vols.; reprint edition. Leiden–New York–Köln: Brill, 1993) 4,1094–104.

However, the stories of the conquest of Jerusalem are as problematic as similar stories of other towns and the details related to it are contradictory. Here again it is relevant to stress the problematic nature of Islamic sources, mainly written many decades after the events from a viewpoint that does not represent that of the earlier Muslims. The sources are moreover interdependent, all repeating patterns that have been shown to be unhistorical in modern scholarship.[29]

This does not mean that it could be shown that the Caliph ʿUmar would *not* have been present there in 637. It is clear that Jerusalem was not merely a city among many others. The point is that its overwhelming importance for the early Muslims is probably an exaggeration. On the Christian side, this was due to the town's importance for Christians, projected onto Muslims. On the Muslim side, the magnification of Jerusalem's importance was partly caused by the later events to which we shall instantly turn.

We are on a more reliable basis with our sources only towards the end of the 7th century. The early Islamic Empire was torn by internal wars, one of which was more important than the others concerning Jerusalem's position. When the last Sufyānid Caliph, Muʿāwiya II died in 683, a major part of the Empire was governed by the counter-Caliph ʿAbdallāh ibn al-Zubayr (683–692), who, had he won, would have been considered the true Caliph, while his short-time Marwānid opponent Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam (r. 684–685) and Marwān's successor ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705) would have been seen as rebels. But things went the other way round, and their roles are reversed in traditional historiography.[30]

Ibn al-Zubayr ruled, among other areas, over the Arabian Peninsula and Mecca, which was the Muslims' centre of religious orientation and, moreover, the site of the annual pilgrimage, *ḥajj*, where the pilgrim caravans arrived every year, giving a golden opportunity to its ruler to propagate his own agenda to pilgrims coming from various parts of the Empire. As the ruler of Mecca, it was easy for Ibn al-Zubayr to claim legitimacy as the rightful ruler of the whole Empire, too, and to represent Marwān and ʿAbd al-Malik as rebels.

The two Umayyads, on the other hand, only ruled over a part of the Greater Syria, including Jerusalem. ʿAbd al-Malik's counter move was to build, in 688–691, the prominent Mosque of the Rock in Jerusalem. A vivid discussion has been going on concerning the role ʿAbd al-Malik tried to give Jerusalem. It seems probable that the new Mosque was part of his attempt to turn the pilgrims away from Mecca, ruled by Ibn al-Zubayr, and to replace that city and its temple, the Kaʿba, by Jerusalem and its grand Mosque as the site of the *ḥajj*. The untypical lay-out of the Mosque of the Rock gives strong grounds for believing that it was purposefully built in order to make the *ṭawāf*, the circumambulation, possible. This *ṭawāf* is an integral part of the Islamic pilgrimage to the Kaʿba and other mosques are not constructed so as to make the *ṭawāf* possible. Thus, the plan of the

[29] See J. Hämeen-Anttila, Jaakko (2009), "Christianity".

[30] On the Umayyad dynasty in general, see M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History. A New Interpretation A.D. 600–750 (A.H. 132)* (2 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1970–1), not always reliable, though), G. R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam. The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661–750* (Carbondale–Edwardsville: Southern University Illinois Press, 1987) and J. Hämeen-Anttila, "The Umayyad State – an Empire?" (in *Imperien und Reiche in der Weltgeschichte. Epochenübergreifende und globalhistorische Vergleiche*, I, ed. M. Gehler and R. Rollinger. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014) 537–57. The Sufyānids and the Marwānids were two branches of the same family and together form the Umayyads.

Mosque of the Rock strongly supports the stories that claim that ʿAbd al-Malik tried to direct the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, instead of Mecca.[31]

It was probably at this point that the conveniently vague verse Q 17: 1 was interpreted to refer to Muḥammad's nightly journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and his subsequent *miʿrāj*, ascent to Heaven, from there and, more particularly, from the very Mosque of the Rock. In the Mosque built to attract pilgrims, there is even a stone with the footprint of Muḥammad on it, marking the exact place from where he ascended to Heaven. This slab of stone may be seen as a relic, mirroring, or competing with, the Black Stone of the Kaʿba, into which the sanctity of the temple is condensed, or the *maqām Ibrāhīm* ("the place of Abraham"), which physically connects the Kaʿba to Abraham, just as the stone with the footprint connects the Mosque of the Rock to Muḥammad. Whether purposefully created as such or not, it remains the sole material evidence for Muḥammad's relation with the sacred city of the Jews and Christians and it has been used for legitimating pilgrimage to Jerusalem.[32]

ʿAbd al-Malik's religious reform was short-lived, though. It certainly met with opposition, but even more important is the fact that ʿAbd al-Malik soon won his opponent, conquered Mecca, and put an end to the Zubayrid revolt, as it is called by later historians. Having gained rule over Mecca, it was easy for ʿAbd al-Malik to give up the reform, which was motivated by Mecca having been in the hands of Ibn al-Zubayr. With Mecca under his control, ʿAbd al-Malik did not need to pursue his, possibly unpopular, reform any further. As the construction of the Mosque had taken its time, ʿAbd al-Malik did not in fact have much time to get his innovation deeply rooted in Muslim consciousness and it was easy for him to cancel the purported reform once it had lost its original reason.

The reform was short-lived but it did not vanish into thin air. It left behind traces of a heated religious debate concerning the sacred hierarchy of Islamic cities, especially Mecca and Jerusalem, but also involving Medina and Damascus. Mecca was the obvious winner in this debate and it remained the central city of Islam, but also Jerusalem's sanctity, second only to Mecca's (and perhaps Medina's), was confirmed in this discussion, even though *ḥadīths* (traditions of the Prophet) also exist expressly denying its sanctity, whether originally circulated by ʿAbd al-Malik's opponents or otherwise conservative Muslims who did not accept the innovation. In this counter propaganda, Jerusalem is merely depicted as one city among others, without any specific sanctity of its own.[33]

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[31] On the Mosque of the Rock in general, see W. Caskel, *Der Felsendom und die Wallfahrt nach Jerusalem* (Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein–Westfalen. Geisteswissenschaften 114, Köln–Opladen, 1963), J. Raby and J. Johns (eds.), *Bayt al-Maqdis. I: ʿAbd al-Malik's Jerusalem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), J. Johns (ed.), *Bayt al-Maqdis. II: Jerusalem and Early Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), A. Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship. Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage* (Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts 8, Leiden–Boston–Köln: Brill, 1999). On the second *fitna*, civil war, see G. Rotter, *Die Umayyaden und der zweite Bürgerkrieg (680–692)* (Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 45/3, Wiesbaden: Harrossowitz, 1982), and on the pilgrimage at that time, see G. R. Hawting, "The *ḥajj* in the Second Civil War," (in *Golden Roads: Migration, Pilgrimage and Travel in Mediaeval and Modern Islam*, ed. I.R. Netton. Wiltshire, 1993) 31–42. On ʿAbd al-Malik, see C. F. Robinson, *ʿAbd al-Malik (*Makers of the Muslim World. Oxford: Oneworld, 2005).

[32] Soon the ritual pilgrimage, *ḥajj*, was redirected to Mecca, but the Mosque and this stone remain important goals for unofficial pilgrimages or visits to holy sites, *ziyāra*. It should be noted that in the Kaʿba, there are no comparable relics related to Muḥammad.

[33] Much of this discussion is found in the literary genre of *faḍā'il* "merits". True to its name, the genre discusses the merits of various towns (or others), especially in contrast with each other. Several works on the superiority, or otherwise, of cities, such as Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, and Damascus, were written

Had ʿAbd al-Malik had reason to pursue his innovation, it might well have been accepted and Islam could have redirected itself towards Jerusalem, with Mecca and Medina dwindling into marginalized provincial towns, only vaguely linked to the birth of Islam with no particular religious significance.[34]

Against the background of Classical and modern Islam, this may sound highly improbable, but one has to remember that the rules of Classical Islam, such as the all-important pilgrimage to Mecca, were only in the process of being created at the time. The vagueness of the Qur'ānic text could well have given room for this reinterpretation. The Qur'ān only speaks of a "protected temple", or "the temple", without actually defining which temple, or mosque, it is speaking about and it is only the centuries-long later tradition which makes us automatically think of the Kaʿba as the sacred temple mentioned in the Qur'ān. The place name Mecca is only once mentioned in the Qur'ān (Q 48: 24) and even then only in passing. In addition, Q 3: 96 mentions Bakka, which the tradition sees as a variant name for Mecca or a part of the city.[35] The Kaʿba is mentioned only twice, both times in the same Surah (Q 5: 95, 97). The word, moreover, merely means "a cubic (temple)" and could easily have been given a reinterpretation at the end of the 7th century, before the formation of Classical Islam. The case of Rome and Jerusalem in Christianity gives a clear example of the ease of such a reinterpretation. Particularly in Catholic tradition, Rome has pushed Jerusalem aside as the holy city of Christianity: a geographic redefinition of a religion is far from impossible when there is good reason for it.

The Umayyads (661–750), based in the Greater Syria, were certainly interested in Jerusalem, but during the ʿAbbāsid period this interest waned when the centre of the Empire moved eastwards with the foundation of Baghdad in 762.[36] Few authors explicitly denied the sanctity of Jerusalem, nor do they seem to have been particularly interested in it either. Now and then a Caliph would visit Jerusalem, but Caliphs also visited Damascus and other major cities. The same goes for the literary interest in Jerusalem and the building and restoration activities there. Travellers often do mention Jerusalem and describe its sights and Caliphs did renovate its mosques and had new constructions built, but it is not easy to see, either quantitatively or qualitatively, that their interest would have significantly surpassed that shown towards other old Islamic cities.

Even the advent of the Crusaders hardly changed the picture. The conflict between the Crusaders and Islamic rulers remained local – and it should be remembered that small Islamic states fought

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over the centuries. In general, see R. Sellheim, "faḍīla." *The Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition*. Eds. B. Lewis et al., 2, Leiden: Brill, 1991) 728–9. Another much favoured mode of participating in this discussion was to circulate *ḥadīths* (very often clearly unauthentic) in which the Prophet is depicted as giving his judgment for or against a town, either in contrast to another or independently.

[34] This is what politically and economically happened to Mecca and Medina already at the end of the 7th century. As political centres, they were marginalized when the gravitation point of the Empire moved with the new conquests first to Greater Syria and then to Iraq.

[35] The form might even be used as evidence against Mecca having been of central importance for the earliest Muslims: it is problematic that an odd phonetic variant is found in a name that should have been familiar to each and every early Muslim.

[36] For the ʿAbbāsids, see F. Omar, *The Abbāsid Caliphate (132/750–170/786)* (Baghdad, 1969), M. A. Shaban, *The ʿAbbāsid Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), M. Sharon, *Black Banners from the East: The Establishment of the ʿAbbāsid State. Incubation of a Revolt* (Jerusalem–Leiden: Magnes Press–Brill, 1983), A. Elad, "Aspects of the Transition from the Umayyad to the Abbāsid Caliphate," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 19 (1995) 89–132, and P. M. Cobb¸ *White Banners. Contention in Abbāsid Syria, 750–880* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

with each other, too – and it is mainly the apocalyptic literature written in Greater Syria that shows a renewed interest in Jerusalem, which became one of the central scenes of apocalyptic events.[37] There were also battles for Jerusalem but again these do not radically differ from the battles fought for the possession of other major cities. Muslims did not react to the coming of the Crusaders by joining their forces to defend Jerusalem from the unbelievers, and most of the Islamic states had hardly more than a lukewarm interest in keeping it as part of *Dār al-Islām* (the Islamic area).

In Greater Syria, there was some interest in Jerusalem and in proclaiming a counter crusade or *jihād*. The most famous advocate for this was the Damascene ʿAlī ibn Ṭāhir al-Sulamī (d. 1107),[38] but this was a strictly local attitude which did not spread to Morocco or Iran or even to areas closer to the scene of the Crusades. It is also clear that in *jihād* theory Jerusalem has no special place. Theoretically, Muslims have an equal obligation to defend any Islamic area invaded by non-Muslim enemies. And in practice, few seemed to care to defend any Islamic area according to the highly theoretical principles of the *jihād*.

The lack of special interest in Jerusalem may also be seen in sources that were written when Jerusalem was in the hands of the Crusaders. The Spanish traveller Ibn Jubayr (d. 1217) travelled in the area in 1183–1185 and wrote a thick book about his travels. In one passage only does he add the routine wish of "may God return it to the Muslims" when speaking about Jerusalem. Otherwise, there is no indication that he would have cared whether the city was in the hands of Muslims or not. He did not even visit Jerusalem, although Muslims could easily go there. Jerusalem was a famous city, but not, as it would seem, particularly important to Ibn Jubayr.[39] Whereas the Damascene al-Sulamī was preaching a campaign against Christians to regain Jerusalem, the Spanish Ibn Jubayr seems to have cared little who ruled over it.

Also the Syrian prince Usāma ibn Munqidh (d. 1188) shows in his *Memoirs* that the Crusaders' rule over Jerusalem did not annoy him, not even the fact that the famous Mosque was in their hands. He does consider the newly-arrived Frankish knights to be uncouth barbarians, but on the other hand he is very sympathetic towards those Crusaders who had lived longer in the East and had been influenced by the superior culture – at least in his eyes – of the local Muslims. He tells how his "friends the Templars", as he calls them, chastised some newcomers who had disturbed the Muslim prince while he was performing his prayers in the al-Aqṣā Mosque, then in Christian hands.[40] There is nothing to imply that Usāma would have thought that Muslims should have recaptured the city.

Again the Crusaders were perhaps more keen than their Muslim neighbours on having Jerusalem in their possession, but even in their case secular considerations were probably more important than religious ones. Usāma's *Memoirs* show that in practice the Templars made little difference between

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[37] See D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 21, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), J. Hämeen-Anttila, *Jeesus, Allahin profeetta. Tutkimus islamilaisen Jeesus-kuvan muotoutumisesta* ([Jesus, the Prophet of Allah. A Study on the Formation of the Islamic Image of Jesus], Suomen Eksegeettisen Seuran Julkaisuja 70, 1998) 31–50, 116–128 (in Finnish). See also I. Lindstedt in this volume.

[38] See P. E. Chevedden, "The view of the Crusades from Rome and Damascus" (in *Cultural Encounters during the Crusades*, ed. K. V. Jensen, K. Salonen and H. Vogt, University Press of Southern Denmark, 2013) 27–53.

[39] See J. Phillips, "The travels of Ibn Jubayr and his view of Saladin" (in *Cultural Encounters during the Crusades*, ed. K. V. Jensen, K. Salonen and H. Vogt, University Press of Southern Denmark, 2013) 75–90.

[40] P. K. Hitti, 2000 [1929] *An Arab-Syrian Gentleman and Warrior in the Period of the Crusades. Memoirs of Usāmah ibn-Munqidh. With a New Preface by Richard W. Bulliett* (New York: Columbia University Press 2000 [1929]) 163–4.

Christians and Muslims. It was small states fighting against each other, not a general war between Muslims and Christians.[41]

After the Crusades, Jerusalem remained in Muslim hands until modern times. It is often, but usually without tangible evidence, claimed that the conflict of Palestine has remained so acute because the Holy Land has been promised to too many religions. In modern Islamic discourse the sanctity and Islamic character of Jerusalem is also often referred to. But is it a central factor in the complicated situation? If the Jewish state had been founded in, e.g., Egypt and Cairo had become the Jewish capital, would the situation have been less complicated? Hardly. Without taking a stance as to who is wrong and who right, in that situation Cairo would have become a similar bone of contention between the Jewish state and the Arab Muslim local inhabitants. It is the inflamed situation that creates antagonistic attitudes and these may be justified by religious arguments, on both sides, but it is difficult to see the problems as arising from a religious ground, instead of the usual political, economic, and demographic causes.

What, then, is the relation of Muslims to Jerusalem, based on an analysis of historical sources? First of all, the holiest places of Islam are located on the Arabian Peninsula (Mecca and Medina), not in Jerusalem. This has more or less been the common opinion after the end of the seventh century. Secondly, Jerusalem and its holy places are respected by Muslims, and this surfaces especially at times when the rule of the city has been disputed: when threatened or in alien hands, the sanctity of Jerusalem is emphasized, at least on a rhetorical level. Thirdly, the cause of the conflict has never been the sanctity of Jerusalem, and changes in its possession have been met with the same reactions as changes in the possession of any other major cities.

The sanctity of Jerusalem is an additional feature which is highlighted in the Jewish or Christian tradition or when the city's possession is disputed. In times of peace, Jerusalem has been for Muslims only one major city among several others.

[41] On the pilgrimages of Christians and Muslims to the same holy places, see A. Jotischky, "Pilgrimage, procession and ritual encounters between Christians and Muslims in the Crusader States" (in *Cultural Encounters during the Crusades*, ed. K. V. Jensen, K. Salonen and H. Vogt, University Press of Southern Denmark, 2013) 245–62.